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SOME THOUGHTS ON RESEARCH AND THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH.

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IN A DISCUSSION OF THE EFFECTS, PRESENT NEEDS, AND FUTURE OF RESEARCH ON THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH, THE POSITION OF THE TEACHER IN ENGLAND IS EMPHASIZED. IN CONSIDERING THE NEED FOR EFFECTIVE USE OF RESEARCH IN ENGLISH TEACHING, THE IMPORTANCE OF ADEQUATE FUNCTIONING BETWEEN TWO ASPECTS OF RESEARCH--COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION--IS STRESSED. ALSO DISCUSSED IS THE NEED FOR AN AUTHORITATIVE, EDITED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF RESEARCH. THE DISCUSSION ENDS WITH A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH PROJECTS BEING CONDUCTED OR RECENTLY CONCLUDED IN ENGLAND. THIS ARTICLE, ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN "ENGLISH IN EDUCATION," SPRING 1967, PAGES 24-29, WAS REPRINTED IN "RESEARCH IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH," VOLUME 2, NUMBER 1, SPRING 1968, PAGES 5-13. (BN)

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In accordance with its policy of reprinting an occasional article of interest to our readers but not readily available to them, Research in the Teaching of English *reproduces here a survey of current research in England on the teaching of English. The article comes from* English in Education *(Spring, 1967, pages 24-29), the journal of the National Association for the Teaching of English, with the permission of the author and the NATE Publications Committee.*

Some thoughts on research and the teaching of English

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A recent article in an educational magazine was entitled "The Knowledge Gap." It carried the implication that somewhere—in the researchers' minds or in their unpublished theses—there lay, like the crock of gold, a treasure of definitive knowledge about teaching. Somewhere else the deprived teachers wandered, thinly garbed in chalk dust and ignorance. Only connect, and rational progress in teaching would naturally ensue.

In the aims and methods of the teaching of English, unfortunately, the major premiss there is untenable. Definitive knowledge, established by experiment and capable of application to the classroom situation, hardly exists. The majority of experimental research programmes are little more than descriptive landscapes enlivened with figures, in which important variables have not been or cannot be controlled, and which can seldom or never be replicated (as would be the case in the physical sciences) in order to establish their reliability and validity. Researchers themselves are well aware of these

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limitations, and are usually most careful to circumscribe any conclusions or generalisations based on their own experiments by reference to the limits of their sampling or of their controls. This is a humility that reflects well on the researchers, but does not prevent the would-be revolutionary among teachers from ignoring the researcher's caveat when that suits his own pet enthusiasm, nor the reactionary from exploiting it as a justification for his own indolent unawareness.

The lack of definitiveness, which may be inherent in the materials and situation of applied educational research in English, is not of course to be construed as inutility. It is mentioned here rather to encourage teachers to examine critically their own skills and needs, and the interest they share with all educationalists in making the best use of whatever knowledge can be established as sound.

Teachers are not, as such, researchers. Conversely, too, as Humpty Dumpty might say. Researchers have, or should have, particular skills in the design of experiments, in the techniques of measurement, which the full-time professional teacher cannot hope to master, least of all if his professionalism rests in the non-mathematical specialties. I do not suppose it is entirely unfair to guess that when the average interested teacher of English is presented with an account of a piece of research he turns first to the general description of the problem, then to the summary and conclusions, brushing with slight horror en route against a few clotted tables of correlations. If the conclusions seem to exemplify his own intuitions about English teaching, there's glory for you; if not, not. That the glory or the shame may be unreliable he may wish to assess, but in the attempt is unlikely to employ criteria which are relevant to research. Interest and participation in research are increasingly open to the teacher—they are part of the contemporary educational climate; but discrimination and judgement of the processes in research terms are not within his normal province, nor are intuition, and long experience of his own expertise of teaching, any substitutes. No sensible teacher pretends that they are, but this frankness brings him no nearer making a sound and economical selection on which to base practical development from the mass of unequal research reports in such a major subject area as English.

There has been in the last few years an enormous expansion in survey and experimentation, and the question that arises is

how to bring this mass of information and assessment to the notice of the teacher who would use it, and of the education authority and the ratepayer, who would pay for it. This is not primarily a question of publication and circulation, but rather one of authority and selection. The dimensions of the problem may be realised in an example: when Braddock, Lloyd-Jones and Schoer[1] compiled their review of research on the teaching of composition for the National Council of Teachers of English in 1963, they and their associates undertook the screening of more than a thousand bibliographic citations, and the careful examination of more than five hundred, in order to identify "the dozen or so most soundly based studies." In the process they collated many points of importance and interest, but of finally acceptable researches only five. Although the present writer has reservations even about one of these, it may be that their criteria for acceptability were too strict—though this would be a good fault. Systematised review, or haphazard dissemination, there is always the risk of loss. But at a time when the volume of work produced is so great, and when it is no longer possible for the teacher of English in England to ignore the outcomes of foreign enquiries—and notably of the work undertaken in the immense English programme in the United States—systematisation would seem to be the safer bet.

RATIONAL USE OF RESEARCH

Five steps are necessary to the rational use of research in the teaching of English. The first is an adequate description of contemporary aims and objectives in teaching the subject; the researcher cannot provide this, though he may be able to help in refashioning it in operational terms. The second is a survey of present practices described in relation to the assumed aims and objectives. The third is an assessment of the outcomes of these practices, similarly described. The fourth is a process of experimentation designed to test other methods and practices or to refine traditional ones where there is seen to be some important inconsistency between objectives and achievement. And the fifth is a developmental programme which should encourage and establish new methods or modifications when these are shown, at an acceptable level of probability, as likely to improve practice. Education in England, and no doubt elsewhere also, exists in a state of chronic crisis, so that the fifth step commonly precedes all the others, and "We

[1] R. Braddock, R. Lloyd-Jones, and L. Schoer, *Research in written composition* (Champaign, Ill.: NCTE, 1963). Has a useful bibliography.

learn by going where we have to go." For this the research organisations must bear some of the responsibility. The experimental researcher is not able, as such, to make value judgements about the aims and priorities of English teaching. What he can do is to provide an instrument that will enable the competent persons—the teacher, the educationalist—to make more reliable judgements, and to set in hand developments of promise. But in England, for a variety of reasons, researchers and research organisations have seldom succeeded in convincing teachers that they have an accessible and trustworthy instrument to offer.

There seems therefore a need in English for an authoritative and edited bibliography of research completed during the last ten years. The editing that is required is not the common conglomeration of abstracts, but one that would first select work as technically sound, would present some estimate of its strengths and weaknesses (since no work is perfectly reliable in this field) and summarise its process and conclusions. Such a bibliography or series of bibliographies (for there is little doubt that subject English would call for subdivision under various headings) could be assembled effectively only by full-time teams of expert assessors preferably established in research information centres. The bibliography would be only the first step in the full communication, but it would be the essential preliminary to the second. This would be the production by a competent English specialist of an evaluative description of the research outcomes listed in the bibliography, with a view to establishing on a sound footing whatever development programmes were desired. This problem of inadequate discrimination and co-ordination is not of course one for English alone; it might well be a cause of wonder that when time, money, and skills are all in short supply the present general post of un-coordinated research bids should continue. Happily, it is only fair to add that research workers are becoming more actively concerned about this. What is, as far as I know, the first attempt to produce just such an evaluated bibliography of research work published during the last ten years on the teaching of English and to base on it a subject report written by an experienced teacher of English is now likely to be undertaken for the Schools Council. The report is hardly to be completed in less than eighteen months; but if it is successful, teachers will presumably call for its extension in the future, and this

should be a more rapid process, especially if the elements of English teaching are isolated for special attention in perhaps an on-going series of smaller reports to meet the enquiries of the teachers.

The purpose of this is neither to lament the dilemma of the researcher, for whom rigorousness is plagued with artificiality, and practicality with poor theory construction, nor to attempt to describe all the areas in which important issues have been investigated. It is rather to identify two aspects of research, namely communication and co-ordination, whose functioning seems at present inadequate. Nevertheless, it may be of interest to glance at a rough map of what is now in hand in research into English teaching in this country. There can be no question here of plotting out all the material; determined readers will prefer to have recourse to such standard reference works as the *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*[2] or to American publications[3] connected with the Office of Education English Programme and the American endeavour to dovetail research and development at their Centres. A good general summary of the lines of need and of development in England and Wales may be found in the Schools Council's *Working Paper No. 3*,[4] both in Part II ("The Field of Research") and in Appendix A.

CURRENT RESEARCH IN ENGLAND

The time has now passed, though it was as recent as 1962, when it could be stated that the perceived importance of educational research could be estimated from the fact that in Great Britain more money was expended on research into glue than into the whole of educational research. A brief selection from researches at present being prosecuted or recently concluded in the teaching of English might include the following items:

The description of the language itself as used by contemporary educated speakers, with the objective of constructing a descriptive register upon which reliable teaching grammar and workbooks could be based[5];

[2] C. W. Harris, ed., *Encyclopedia of educational research*, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1960). Very expensive, and a pudding-stone style, but much information. The next edition is due in 1969.

[3] For example, see E. R. Steinberg's "Research on the teaching of English under Project English," *PMLA*, 1964, 79 (2), 50-76.

[4] *English*. Working Paper No. 3. Schools Council. H.M.S.O. 1965.

[5] London University, Professor R. Quirk.

The application to the teaching of English of the knowledge and methods of structural linguistics[6];

Methods of teaching reading, with special reference to the i.t.a.[7];

Sociological factors influencing not only how children speak but their understanding also of what they hear and perceive[8];

Under-achievement in English by Grammar School pupils[9];

The formulation of oral tests[10];

The multiple marking of composition[11];

The development of language and thinking in E.S.N. children[12];

The treatment of dyslexia.[13]

In addition, there is considerable work in hand on the difficulties and special problems raised by the need to educate immigrant and bi-lingual children[14] in an English educational system.

It will be seen that such studies cover a wide range, from fundamental long-term enquiry to the short-term specific examination of particular issues such as the techniques of marking. It is feasible to suggest a number of categories under which the researches directly connected with teaching might be subsumed:

Developmental and descriptive studies (in what ways does language develop? what "registers" are used in various situations?);

Studies and operational descriptions of the levels of skill, and their measurement;

The relationship of language and thought and the formation of concepts;

Internal and external factors conditioning linguistic failure and success;

[6] London University, Professor M. A. K. Halliday.
[7] London University, Reading Research Unit, Dr. J. Downing.
[8] London University, Dr. B. Bernstein.
[9] Durham University, Mr. E. A. Hewitt.
[10] Birmingham University, Professor E. A. Peel.
[11] London University, Mr. J. N. Britton.
[12] Birmingham University, Mr. J. Gulliford.
[13] Leeds University, Professor G. P. Meredith.
[14] London, Professor B. Pattison; Leeds, Miss J. Derrick; Birmingham, Professor E. A. Peel.

The bearing of linguistic achievement on attitudes, personality, and available intelligence;

and it is safe to say that in each of these categories at most age levels the four skills are the object of practical concern in research at present. Each and every inquiry contains numerous sub-issues. The teacher may ask in classroom terms: what is the best method of teaching the novel? But which novel? For what purpose? To which age group? In which social environment? And so on—there is no end. And in the few categories above one has not touched on the related problems posed by the use we should make of the mass-media as part of the language of communication; on the place of drama; on literature as a whole; nor have I queried the linguistic resources of the teachers themselves, nor teachers' conceptions and society's of the roles and aims of the teacher of English. The need to decide priorities and to select, communicate, and build on the really valid outcomes is apparent.

RESEARCH AFOOT IN ENGLAND

This then is a suitable point to consider the immediate future relationship between research and English teaching. The signs are encouraging. There has never before been, I think, so close a reciprocal activity and sharing of concern between the Universities, the Schools, and the Examining Bodies. The "knowledge" referred to in my opening paragraphs may after all be no parcel of facts to be transferred from place to place, but an organic growth from the interaction of researchers, assessors, and practitioners. Proposals are afoot, for example, to survey the state of English teaching, using as part of the data material extracted from the recent Government Social Survey[15]; to examine the importance of continuity in the teaching of English[16]; to make more widely available the best current practice in the study of prose literature[17]; to establish what is necessary and at what stage (probably very early) in propounding a scheme of "compensatory" language experience for those children deprived by circumstance of a nourishing linguistic background.[18] On all of a number of very important centres of interest there is work started or proposed: the structural examination of the language itself; the inclusion of oral work as a major factor in skills to be taught and in personal

[15] NATE, Newcastle, Mr. W. Mittins.
[16] Sussex University, Professor G. Allen.
[17] Sheffield University, Mr. F. Whitehead.
[18] Swansea University, Professor C. Gittins.

and social development; on the links between language and the development of rational and mental growth; on the search for normative and criterion measures which would enable a valid description to be attempted of the objectives of the teaching of writing skills; the need to find ways of assessing valued elements in English examinations both oral and written so as to exert a constructive influence on the aims of the teaching. All such interests are part of one programme—the search for what constitutes the ability to communicate satisfactorily in English at various ages. There is room only for an example or two. Thus, there is reason to expect that the development by research of adequate methods of assessing listening comprehension now being investigated by Birmingham University and the Welsh, West Midland and Northern Boards,[19] or the experiment carried out in an examination of Oral English by the Southern Regional Board in conjunction with Southampton University[20] will help to encourage the new emphasis being given in the classroom to these important skills. Similarly, the London Institute of Education's experiment with the Cambridge Board[21] into the process of multiple marking has shown that it is possible to save an important part—many teachers would say the most important and valid part—of the traditional mode of assessment of writing skills.

All this may show the rapid growth of an awareness among educationalists of every sphere that without proper co-ordination of effort the products of so much labour may be fragmentary and too idiosyncratic to influence practice. Particularly valuable in this context is the constellation of researches now being initiated by workers from London and Birmingham in a conscious effort to integrate a series of researches into various aspects of English over the age-range 11 to 18. These researches include a developmental study[22] of the written language of pupils between these ages, with the aim of studying the processes by which the written language of children becomes differentiated into kinds of discourse appropriate to different purposes, and in particular to study the dynamic relationship of "personal" to "impersonal" uses of the written language. A second element is a description and investigation of the skills

[19] Listening Comprehension Trial Examination, Birmingham University, Dr. A. M. Wilkinson.
[20] *Examinations Bulletin No. 11*, Schools Council, H.M.S.O. 1966.
[21] *Examinations Bulletin No. 12*, Schools Council, H.M.S.O. 1966.
[22] London University, Mr. J. N. Britton.

of speaking[23] and listening, to assess what orate skills may be reasonably expected of pupils at different ages, and what factors are critical in helping the pupils to achieve success in these skills. Another aspect of the work is a developmental study of the ability to comprehend and interpret written language,[24] and a fourth is an inquiry into the nature of children's questions and the criteria used by children to assess the adequacy of answer in various contexts.[25] The final proposal in this group is for a normative and descriptive study of the use of language by children of various ages in the light of a contemporary description of the English language,[26] a proposal which it is hoped will provide a linking element and a common theory of description for the whole group of enquiries. It will thus be seen that these proposals taken as a group are concerned with a very representative and wide area of English teaching, including as they do enquiries into speech, reading, listening, and writing, and into the intellectual and social implications and backgrounds of these skills.

All this takes time, but it should be time well spent, if it results in a valid communication and the establishment of coordination in educational research.

There follows a note of the name and location of the references mentioned above, and a short bibliography.[27]

[23] Birmingham University, Dr. A. M. Wilkinson.
[24] Birmingham University, Professor E. A. Peel.
[25] London University, Dr. B. Bernstein.
[26] London University, Professor M. A. K. Halliday.
[27] R. L. Lyman, *Summary of investigations relating to grammar, language, and composition* (Supplementary Educational Monograph. Chicago: Univer. of Chicago, 1929). The best thing of its type—it is a pity that no real equivalent yet exists for later decades.